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ABSTRACT

For educators, a thorough understanding of adolescents' concepts of caring is critical. This paper reports on how early adolescents themselves view the concept of caring. A fundamental issue relating to caring is whether it is primarily innate or learned. This study, which involved observing and interviewing students, was conducted in two middle schools in a large urban area in a Midwestern state. One school was in the heart of the urban area and had about equal numbers of African-American and poor Caucasian students, a large percentage of them Appalachian. The other school was in a suburb and had a mixed population due to desegregation bussing. Participants were nominated by teachers as well as peers. In looking at students' definitions of caring, the results show several points to be emphasized. First, middle level students in grades 6, 7 and 8 have a complex understanding of what caring is and how it shows itself in their lives. Their understanding cannot be predicted by or correlated with gender, age, academic grade, or teacher or peer identification as caring or uncaring. The voices of these students appear to confirm the notion that altruism and caring are constructs of well-informed adolescents. Contains 17 references. (BF)

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR ADOLESCENT STUDIES

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URBAN AND SUBURBAN TEENS' PERCEPTION OF CARING

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Urban and Suburban Teens' Perception of Caring

Caring is a fundamental characteristic of human nature. Our understanding of the concept of caring is illusive, in part because it appears in so many contexts.

In everyday discourse we use the word "care" quite freely. For example, when asked to select a restaurant, a person might say "I don't care." Packages with fragile items in them may be stamped with "Handle with Care." On a philosophical and spiritual level, the concept links or touches other concepts, such as empathy, altruism, pro-social behavior, democracy, and collaboration.

For educators the importance of understanding adolescents' concepts of caring is critical. The concept of caring underlies our understanding of how to foster the development in young people of a genuine sense of confidence, mastery, accomplishment, hopefulness, and participation in service to persons in the community and a commitment to social justice and obligation. An understanding of the concepts of caring can lay the groundwork for creating social environments in which youth can strengthen their commitment to being caring individuals themselves and contributing to a caring community. Much of the literature on caring focuses on adults, and due to the complexity of the concept, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, nurses, educators, and theologians have contributed to our understanding of the concept of caring. This paper reports on how early adolescents themselves view the concept of caring.

In exploring the concept of caring a fundamental question is in terms of the innate versus the learned nature of this concept. Bateson (1990), for example, has investigated the

controversy between those who see that humans as social egotists versus those who view humans with a capacity for empathy and altruism. His studies support the view of humans as able to care for others to fulfill altruistic needs, not just selfish motives. Even though humans are seen as having caring as a basic capacity, Noddings (1994) supports the view that caring must be cultivated in order to grow and flourish.

Benner and Wrubel (1989) in the Primacy of Caring proposed that "caring is always understood in a context" (p. 5), and Seigfried states that "one cannot look at caring relations separate from the economic, political, and social contexts in which they occur" (p. 89). These are examples of a main theme from those who define caring as part of a relationship or a connectedness with another being.

The philosopher Martin Buber (1965) suggests that caring is like a dialogue, "where each participant really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living, mutual relationship...." (quoted in Vezeau and Schroeder, p. 4). Another philosopher Milton Mayeroff (1971) describes caring as helping someone grow toward self-actualization. According to Mayeroff "to help another person grow is at least to help him care for something or someone apart from himself. And it involves encouraging and assisting him to find and create areas in his own life in which he is able to care. Also it is to help that other person come to care for himself,...." (p. 7). Mayeroff identified the components of caring to include devotion, patience, honesty, trust, humility, hope, and courage.

The sociologist Robert Wuthnow (1991), equates caring to compassion which is most often exemplified through individual acts which he calls "voluntary caring." In his opinion,

compassion entails much more than just helping others, it is "a value, a means of expression, a way of behaving, a perspective in society." (p. 308). Carol Gilligan (1982), a psychologist, developed a theory of gender differences in moral development and views caring as a grid in which relationships exist. It involves others and self in a "dynamic bond of interdependence" (p.149). To Benner & Wrubel, "caring is a word for being connected" (p.1). This connection they suggest, "enables people to discern problems, to recognize possible solutions, and to implement those solutions" (p.4). Educators Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, and Steve Van Bocken (1990), define caring as "concern for the life and growth of the person in relationship" (p.62).

This connection of self and others is similarly portrayed in Noddings (1984) who believes that "caring for self, for the ethical self, can emerge only from caring for others" and one cares when "the other's reality becomes a real possibility for me" (p.14). This relationship involves a "feeling with" which she calls "engrossment," a temporary state in which the "one-caring" receives the "cared-for" into himself/herself, and sees and feels with the other (p.30).

In nursing where caring is seen as an integral part of the profession, it is believed that "the precursor to caring is connecting" (Clayton, Murray, Horner, and Greene, 1991, in Chinn). In this field caring is "a humanistic and interpersonal process that is essential for a therapeutic relationship between the nurse and client" (McPherson, 1991, in Chinn p.26). To Green (1990), caring "involves the capacity to grasp the lived reality of other living persons, to help those others grow in their own authentic fashions, or to attain a well-being

of which they may be deprived" (p.30). Watson 1985, portrays caring as a commitment to an end, the protection, enhancement, and preservation of the dignity of the other.

These definitions portray two types of relationships. In Buber's and Gilligan's definitions, the connection is a two-way relationship that involves mutuality and interdependence. The relationship portrayed in the other definitions is somewhat uneven or one-sided. In this relationship the "one-caring" performs the action and the "cared-for" receives that action. The "one-caring" has "compassion", "concern", "feels with," "protects," "preserves," "enhances," "helps" the "cared-for." Although Watson alludes to a "commitment to an end" and Wuthnow to a "perspective in society," it is still from the point of view of the "one-caring." However, the places between the "one-caring" and the "cared-for" are interchangeable; one may at times do the caring while at others be the recipients of it.

How do adolescents define caring? Preisser (1989) in a study of 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th, graders found that adolescents described prosocial behavior in terms of being helpful, caring, and acting in a socially desirable or positive manner. Others defined it in terms of internalized values, ideals, or morals.

Mary Faeth Chenery (1991) when examining the nature of the camp environment in relation to the concept of caring asked adolescents "what does it mean to say that someone is a caring person?" Although the question did not ask for a definition of caring, the themes present in their responses reflect many of the notions associated with the concept of caring.

Helping was the most common theme, "helping another person when he/she is sick or hurt." Another major view was that a caring person "is there for you," "loves you like a

brother, real close like God is." Caring means reaching out to others, sharing, and respecting. A caring person is sensitive to others and "will notice when someone is excluded and sad." Caring also means getting along with others and "being open to other ideas."

While these responses may not indicate a sophisticated definition of caring, they do reveal common themes present in more philosophical definitions such as the ones presented. In addition, and perhaps because they are describing a caring person, the responses reflect a one-way relationship in which the "one-caring" performs the caring action while the "cared-for" receives that action.

Methodology

Subjects

The study was conducted in two middle schools (one with 6th, 7th, and 8th grades and the other with 7th and 8th grades) in a large urban area in a midwestern state. One school (7th and 8th grades) was in the heart of the urban area and had about equal numbers of African-American and poor Caucasian, a large percentage of them Appalachian (Urban Middle School). The other middle school was in a suburb and had a mixed population due to bussing for desegregation (Suburban Middle School). These schools were selected from nominations of "caring" schools.

We observed a total of five academic teams, three at Suburban, one at each grade level (6th, 7th, and 8th) and two at Urban (7th and 8th, urban did not have 6th grade). Subjects for interviews were selected from these teams as well as from a general list.

Table 1 shows the total number of subjects interviewed by grade, and with gender and race percentiles.

able 1: subjects interviewed - race and gender percentiles

GRADE	TOT	FEMALES								MALES							
		TOT	%	W	%	B	%	O	%	TOT	%	W	%	B	%	O	%
6TH	27	11	41	10	91	1	9	0	0	16	59	12	75	4	25	0	0
7TH	40	27	68	18	67	8	30	1	3	13	32	6	46	6	46	1	8
8TH	34	17	50	8	47	9	53	0	0	17	50	15	88	2	12	0	0
TOTALS	101	55	54	36	65	18	33	1	2	46	46	33	72	12	26	1	2

Student groups were also interviewed in the following extracurricular activities: at Suburban - Community Service Club, Student Council, Peer Tutor (students tutor their peers after regular school hours), and Just Plain Gifted (an African American female support group). At Urban - Student Council and Guardian Vikings (a group composed of eighth grade honors students who are involved in community projects).

To select students for the interviews, the classes of each team were given a peer nomination form which asked students to define caring and nominate the five most "caring" peers in their team. Teachers were given a similar form to nominate the five most "caring" and "uncaring" students in their team.

Upon collecting these nominations, we created a list of students for each team in each school. We tried to select a racially and gender balanced sample which included names from the peer and teacher nomination lists. We chose names that had received the most nominations, as well as those that had been nominated by teachers as least caring. We also included some that had received no nominations from either group. Teachers in each team

reviewed the lists to give feedback on the representativeness of the selected group in regards to gender, race, socioeconomic, and caring/uncaring behavior.

Observations

Three members of the research staff visited both schools weekly from the beginning of November 1992 through February 1993. Observations took place in the classrooms, halls, and cafeteria. The investigators usually followed their assigned grade team from class to class, recording any caring or uncaring student behaviors.

Interviews

We provided parent permission forms to each student we had selected for interviewing. At Urban we had selected 37 seventh graders and 38 eighth graders. Of those, only 17 seventh graders and 14 eighth graders returned the permission forms. In order to complete our sample, we selected additional names from a general list which had been previously compiled.

At Suburban we gave parent permission forms to 28 sixth graders, 34 seventh graders and 28 eighth graders. Of those, only 17 sixth graders, 15 seventh graders and 14 eighth graders returned the signed parent permission forms. We once again had to select names from a general list. This caused in some grades an uneven representation.

Teachers organized an interview schedule for the students in their team. Interviews were conducted from the beginning of March and lasted through May. To minimize disruption and loss of class time, students were normally taken from only one teacher's class (usually the team leader). The investigator would come to that class with the name of the

student to be interviewed during that period. The teacher had a few words with the student about the interview before the investigator accompanied the student to a prearranged place were the interview took place. Interviews lasted between 30-40 minutes each. The same interview protocol was used for each interviewee. At the end of the interview the investigator accompanied he student back to class.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved standard methodology in naturalistic inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Coding. Data at each school were color coded. In addition, we assigned an exclusive number to each student and a code of three letters to each question in the interview protocol.

After the interview tapes were transcribed, individual descriptors to each question were transferred to 8x5 cards which included the three letter code of the question, the number code for that student followed by two letter codes, the first representing race and the second gender.

Content Analysis. Once all the descriptors to a question had been transferred, they were organized by theme into categories.

"Member checking" - "involve checking the experiences the researcher has had against the experiences and understandings of members of the group," and "triangulation" - "involve checking propositions either with other members, or, more often, with other

methodological tools and measures." (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, p.186), were subsequently used before the final categories were agreed upon.

Findings

In examining students' perceptions of caring, we first looked at the complexity of their understanding of caring. Of the 101 students, three were unable to respond to the question, "What do you think of when I say the world, 'caring'?" Seventeen students (5 sixth graders, 5 seventh graders, and 7 eighth graders) used a very simple, one-dimensional definition. For example, "loving people," "caring," "stands up for you," "buys me stuff," "being nice to people." Some of the students who provided this one-dimensional concept of caring were designated by teachers as very caring while others as very non-caring. For example, one student had 17 peer nominations and 5 of the them had none. In this group of 17, we found no differences in regards to gender, race, grade, or academic standing.

Another 31 students provided a broader definition of caring, using two dimensions. Most of the two dimensional responses presented described two discrete dimensions, while others presented one dimension with an elaboration. In the first case, for example, one 6th grade white male responded "Don't abuse things that aren't yours; taking care of what you do" or this 7th grade white female who said, "To be there to listen to people. To think about others before you think about yourself." Or as this 7th grade Black male said "Caring about yourself. Caring about other people." Examples of two dimensional definitions where one dimension is an elaboration on the first include:

"Taking care of someone, like if someone was making fun of somebody, tell them to stop it." (6th white male)

"A person that shows compassion towards you. A person that shows they care for you (when) you are in need." (8th Black male)

"A person that is very easy to get along with. A person that is easy to talk to." (8th white female)

As with the students who used only one dimension in their description, the students using two dimensions represented a variety of ages, academic grades, teacher and peer nominations, and both races.

Forty-one of the students across grades 6, 7, and 8 define caring in a three-dimensional fashion. These students go beyond exclusively identifying attributes of a caring person and identify themselves or another as a care-giver or cared-for. For these students, to care is more than aid to be exchanged, which implies the care-giver simply satisfies the immediate need of the cared-for. Instead a reciprocal or extended relationship seems to be an integral part of these students' definitions of caring. "Spending time with someone," "You are there for them anytime they need you," "do stuff with them," and "to really get to know a person" are characteristics that are sparkled throughout these students' definition of caring. Table 2 gives examples of seven students who define caring in a three-dimensional manner. Within each of these definitions is a sense that caring is also more than a reaction to a single event. There is an implied commitment to a longer-term relationship.

As with the one and two-dimensional definitions, differences between gender and among other characteristics one might have expected to have had an impact on the way students define caring, have not been uncovered in this study.

In this brief look at students' definitions of caring, several points can be emphasized. First, middle level students in grades 6, 7 and 8 have a complex understanding of what caring is and how it shows itself in their lives. Their understanding cannot be predicted by or correlated with gender, age, academic grade, or teacher or peer identification as caring or uncaring.

The voices of these students appear to confirm the notion that altruism and caring are well-formed adolescents' constructs. Educators are thus challenged to provide opportunities so that the understanding of caring can be translated into actions. Educators have the responsibility to provide environments and challenges where the ethic of care is nurtured. As Noddings (1994) argues, "the primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring" (p. 172).

Table 2. Examples of Students' Three-Dimensional Definitions of Caring

EXAMPLE OF RESPONSES	GENDER	GRADE	ACAD. STAND.	CARING NOMI.
"Doing something for somebody when they can't do it, like helping them; giving them their needs and watching over them."	M	6	A-	NC
"Others are kind; you want to help somebody, and loving."	M	7	C+	C
"Just like them; you love that person, get involved with them; you care for a person."	M	7	B-	NC
"To be sure somebody knows how you feel; to have sympathy for somebody; to have feelings for someone; to be interested about someone."	M	7	D+	C
"Caring for people in general; you're nice to them; you care about somebody, you feel good about him (a student) and stuff like that."	M	8	C+	NC
"I think of loving. Maybe appreciating the fact that somebody's different than you. If you care for somebody, no matter what they are or what they do wrong, then you still care for them. You appreciate who they are."	F	6	B	ON/OFF
"The way another person feels towards another person about their feelings. Like if I was injured or something and you were to come by, you wouldn't sit there and laugh at me. You'd want to try and help."	F	6	A	C

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